

Charles McC. Mathias Jr.

Can the Political Parties Survive?

The political parties have singularly failed—both internally and in competition with each other—to raise and define many of the crucial issues facing us...

They have failed on the issue of crime. Major crime rose 148 per cent under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Under President Nixon's administration, criminal activity was not only on the rise in the White House, but in the school house. While crime increased an additional 30 per cent on the streets of America, assaults on students in schools rose 83 per cent and drug and alcohol abuse in school rose 37.5 per cent....

Our political parties have failed on the issue of jobs. The promise of the Employment Act of 1946 is unfulfilled.

Mr. Mathias is a Republican senator from Maryland. This article is excerpted from an address before the National Press Club.

Eight million Americans today are unemployed and looking for work, and neither party has come up with the only viable answer, a job for every American ready, willing and able to work.

America's political parties have failed on the issue of welfare reform. From 1964 to 1975, federal, state and local welfare expenditures rose from \$5.6 billion to more than \$37.7 billion. Today one person in every six in New York City is on welfare. The present welfare system has wasted money. But it also has wasted human lives. It has created a cycle of dependency that feeds people and keeps them alive. But it gives them no hope for a better tomorrow.

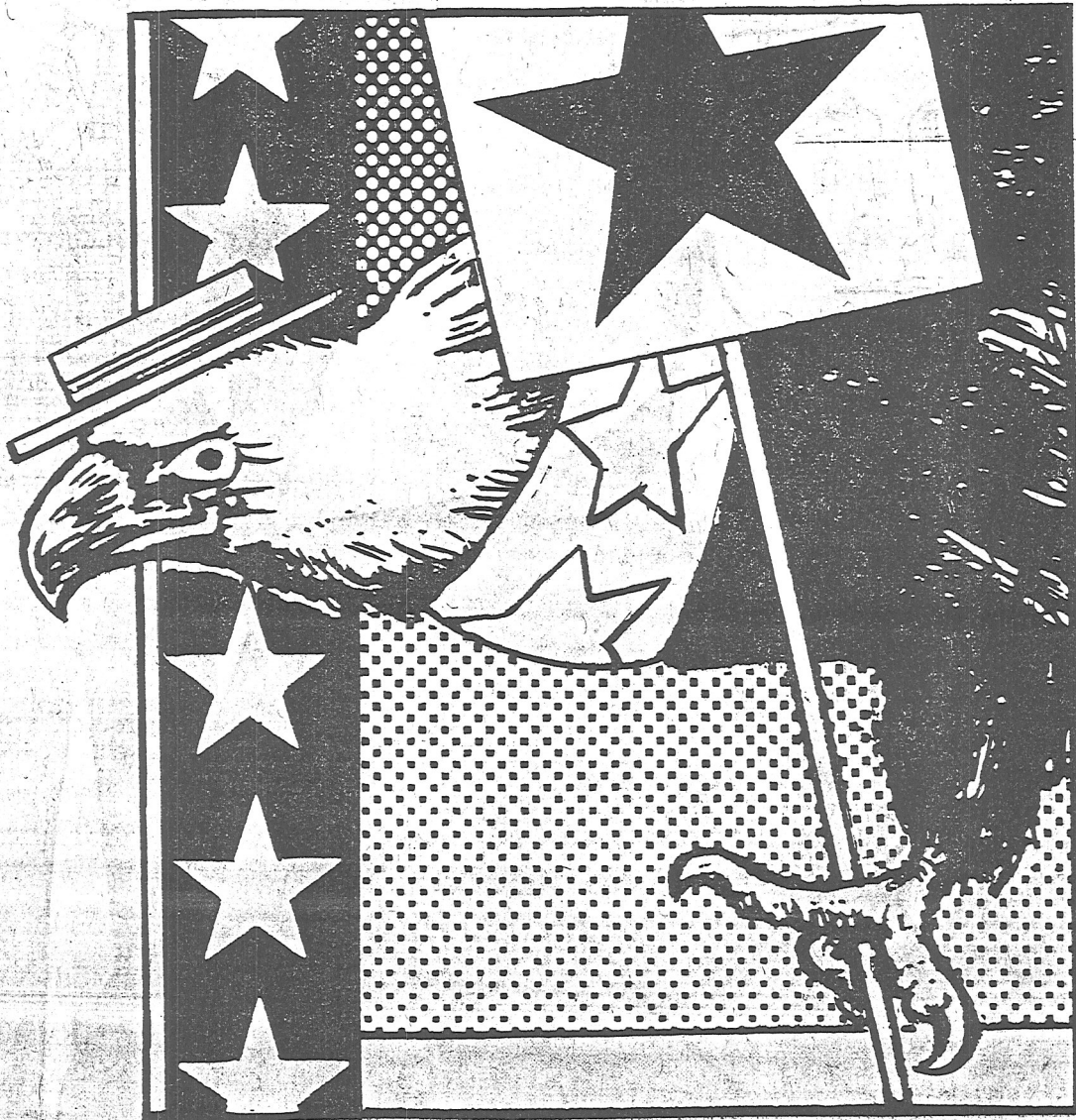
Our political parties have failed on the issue of tax reform. If you earn \$8,000 a year working in a steel mill, you pay the full tax. If you earn \$8,000 a year buying and selling General Motors stock, you pay only half as much tax; and, if you earn your living busily clipping coupons from municipal bonds, you may pay no tax at all. Both parties give lip service to tax reform—but no real tax reform has been enacted...

Despite all of the rhetoric, our parties

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have failed to surmount bureaucratic red tape. Businessmen are confronted with more than 50,000 pages of federal regulations which appear each year in the Federal Register... Unfortunately, regulatory reform is at the bottom of the political shopping list. The tragic fact is that both parties know that you can get more attention playing garbage man for a day than you can by wading into the complex and tedious area of regulatory reform, even though in the long run it could save America's consumers billions of dollars.

Our parties have tragically failed to deal with the problem of race relations in America. Race relations today may very well be worse than they were a decade ago. South Boston may only be a more visible aspect of that problem. The problem of race relations has been allowed to fester by the lack of creative thinking in the political processes. Everything is oversimplified with code words and slogans. You are either for busing or you are against it; you are either for racial quotas or you are against them. While tied up in such simplistic approaches, our political parties have failed to explore the use of new tools to promote equal opportunity... Worse yet, there are important questions which neither party is even willing to ask. We must consider, for example, whether the EEOC has inadvertently provided a disincentive to locate manufacturing plants in the inner cities thereby compounding the employment problems of the very people it was designed to help.



By Dennis Hermanson for The Washington Post

Our political parties have failed on the issue of health. If the Republicans have a health program, I don't know what it is. As for the Democrats, repudiations are stamping out ideas faster than they can sprout...

Our parties have failed to improve the quality of life in urban America. Urban renewal has torn up neighborhoods and repackaged the slums in glass and concrete cages where a man cannot get his shoes fixed or buy a beer. If technocrats of the future have us living with artificial grass under giant domes, there may be air conditioning and all the amenities of modern living. But without trees, grass, wind and rain, without buildings on a human scale, life will not be enriched. Chickens may thrive in automated hen houses, but man will not...

But the greatest failure of our political parties is the failure to improve the significance of human life. American youth are protesting the dehumanization of society. Their sisters are on drugs and their mothers are on valium. They live in look-alike houses, eat artificial food, and often end up in meaningless jobs. There is a loss of community, a loss of self-reliance and a loss of purpose...

The failure of our political parties has been accompanied by a rise in the number of persons who register as Independents. In 1964, 22 per cent of the registered voters were Independents. Today this has grown to 32 per cent. More interestingly, the percentage of Independents increases with education. Among Americans with only a grade school education, 21 per cent are Independents, while 38 per cent of college graduates are Independents. The percentage of Independents is also higher among the upper income groups and among young people. For those under 30,

45 per cent are Independents as opposed to 40 per cent Democrats and 15 per cent Republicans.

Being an Independent today may not so much reflect apathy, as a disgust with the alternatives. Independents may be like Jefferson who said, "If I could not go to Heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." ... Not only are most Independents disaffected with our political parties, but millions of Americans are only nominally registered as Republicans and Democrats. For them the parties are nothing more than flags of convenience.

I would warn both parties that there will be a major political realignment in 1976 if they do not respond now to the basic concerns of this country. I have been to the streets of Boston and the union halls of Baltimore and the people out there couldn't care less what party you belong to.

Americans are no longer willing to accept a political party as the lesser of evils. They are no longer willing to accept the old pol technique of never mentioning issues or of moving so fast that issues don't arise and contradictions can't be spotted. Nor will people continue to accept 30-second subliminal spots of daisies or giant saws cutting off the Eastern Seaboard. And they won't accept parties which have no vision for America. The pap that comes out of both National Committees is a fraud on their contributors. I have seldom been able to use any of it, and it would be a sad day if anyone was elected to high public office who did.

On the Democratic side there are nine candidates at last count. Several more wait in the wings.

As they push and shove from state to state, it might be expected that they would stumble onto the issues, but so far they seem to be stumbling over each other. No

clear directions seem to emerge and no new confidence is being instilled in the political leadership of the country.

But on the Republican side it is harder and the outlook dimmer. It is not merely a matter of President Ford's fascination with a very real threat on his right that is limiting debate among Republicans. It is time to recognize the attrition that has debilitated the Republican Party. In 1964 when Edward Bennett Williams left the party and five or six years later when John Lindsay and Ogden Reid left the party it was easy for the regulars to say "Good riddance—those are just the rats leaving!"

But it wasn't only the restless, bright, liberal young men who were leaving. It was also thousands of thoughtful, serious, concerned and moderate women and men of every age and economic status. Many more didn't even bother to drop out—they went into hibernation. And the trend continues. One straw in the wind is the new freshman class of 1980 at Goucher College—with students who will admit to being Republicans down seven per cent from last year.

And so the intraparty debate grows more and more tepid, and less and less relevant. And so a great creative force is wasted and dissipated at a time it is most needed.

If the political parties are to survive, they must become more than election vehicles. They must do more than follow public opinion polls. In the last analysis they must begin to do what is right, to provide for the full development of the potential of every American...

If our parties do not respond, there are precedents for what must happen. Republicans and Democrats, like Whigs and Federalists, will pass into history as others emerge who speak to modern man.